

## THE CASTE: AN OBSTACLE TO SOCIAL HARMONY

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Indian society is based on the basis of the caste system and the Hindu people are divided into as many as six thousand castes. The caste system is derived from the Varna system which is having sanction in Rig Veda (Xth Mandal). The Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra are four Varnas in descending order, of which first three varnas are known as "Dvija"<sup>1</sup>, while Shudras are there to serve upper Varnas. Later on this Varna system gave birth to Caste system when there happened inter-Varna marriages because the blood purity was given prime importance by the Brahmins. The caste system forced many restrictions and injustices on the Shudras while the Brahmins enjoyed all kinds of privileges. The attempt here is to study the consequences of the caste system in the present context.

The caste was the prime basis of social organization in pre-colonial India. The caste system is the basic nature of Hinduism and prevailing throughout the ages in Indian history. It is beneficial to upper castes by conferring privileges upon them, and at the same time it is very oppressive to lower castes and especially to untouchables as it took away all kinds of human rights from them. They were made just for providing services to upper castes without any gain. They were never treated on the lines of humanity. They were deprived of all the natural human rights; the animals could enter in the temples and untouchables were regarded as so impure that they could not enter the temples. The evil effects of the caste system do not merely suppress the untouchables (Dalits) and lower caste people, but due to persistence of the caste system, India as a nation cannot progress by any means as a whole.

The question of the caste is not addressed properly by colonial as well as nationalist historians, because colonial historians got the knowledge of caste system from the Sanskrit books written by the Brahmins. And there was not any hope from the Brahmin historians to question the legacy of their holy books, as it may cause the loss of privileges offered by these books to them through the caste system. No wonder Ambedkar noted that the colonial and nationalist emphasis on the Indo-European roots to Vedic culture only limited the compass of historical discourse. Instead he sought a more robust and thorough critique of periodization, sources and methodology deployed in studying Indian history.<sup>2</sup>

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule was the first to look into this important issue seriously with his perception of the colonialism and the caste system. He had understood that the upper caste Hindus had established their dominance with oppression and consent, more than force, they used ideological weapon of religious texts to instruct the lower castes and thus achieve their enslavement. He realized the fact that the upper castes were the largest beneficiaries of the colonialism and so criticized the British Government for looking the Indian situation through the eyes of treacherous Brahmins. He was conscious of the collusive and conspiratorial relationship between the internal colonialism i. e. caste and external colonialism i. e. the British and so he strongly criticized the British for accomplishing the upper caste desires. He believed that feudalism and

<sup>1</sup> Dvija means twice born, one birth from mother and other is considered when the ceremony of 'Upanayan Samskar' at the age of 7 to 8 was performed for a boy from Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishyas. But later on the Brahmins refused to perform Upanayan Samskar to Vaishyas.

<sup>2</sup> Rege Sharmila, (Introduction and Selection), (2013), *Against the Madness of Manu: B. R. Ambedkar's Writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy*, Navayana Publications, New Delhi, p. 73.

capitalism in India were fused into caste-class mode of Brahminism.<sup>3</sup> He showed the exploitative nature of caste system and its presence in the colonial rule causing the exploitation and degradation of the non-Brahmins, women and dalits. He pointed out that the Brahmanical knowledge of history is responsible for safeguarding of caste and patriarchy and producing *shudra-atishudra* as docile subjects. According to him, the Brahmanical system enslaved and subdued lower caste and untouchables by engraving false identities of caste to them. He articulated the prediction that when true history would unravel the trickery of Brahmin caste towards the downtrodden people and their history of glorious struggle against oppressive, unjust caste system; and then they would revolt against it. They would demolish Brahmanical hegemony and caste system.<sup>4</sup> He innovatively employed Vico's method of asserting facts through using etymology, mythology and analysis of traditions, and thus unfolded social strife between Aryan Brahmins and Non Aryan *shudra-atishudras*.<sup>5</sup> He thus showed the evil effects of the caste system. According to Sharad Patil, he espoused the cause of historical materialism in India: 'History of India is history of caste struggle.'<sup>6</sup>

Caste system is studied deeply by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar who having been studied in America and England, well versed with historical methods; carried further the legacy of Mahatma Phule and Satyashodhak-Non-Brahmin movement. His strength as historian is reflected in his writings on social history of India. He employed scientific method to disclose the history of caste. He confronted strongly with the hegemonic design based on positivist method of colonial and national historians. By making several innovations he developed new conceptual and methodological tools of writing social history of caste. But Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar even today has to face negligence by the so called intelligentsia; according to Dr. Sharmila Rege, his studious writings like "Castes in India" had to face negligence from sociologists and in a similar vein; there is a near-complete absence of an engagement with Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's writings on ancient India by historians.<sup>7</sup>

According to Romila Thapar, for him, caste was not just a social hierarchy but was linked to issues of domination and subordination.<sup>8</sup> He defined caste as an endogamous social group; the emergence of caste was the result of the superimposition of endogamy over exogamy.<sup>9</sup> He has proved that caste is an important barrier to the economic progress as it does not allow the man to do the work of his own interest. He has shown that the caste operates as economic system of surplus appropriation based on the principle of graded inequality and exploitation. He states that caste system is a not merely division of labor but it is also division

<sup>3</sup> Chavan Dilip, (2013), *Language Politics under Colonialism: Caste, Class and Language Pedagogy in Western India*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle Upton Tyne, U. K. p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Bagade Umesh, (2006), *Maharashtratil Prabodhan ani Vargjatiprabhutwa*, Sugava Prakashan, Pune, p. 331.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 333.

<sup>6</sup> Patil Sharad, (1993), *Marxwad-Phule Ambedkarwad*, Sugava Prakashan, Pune, p. 84.

<sup>7</sup> Rege Sharmila, (Introduction and Selection), (2013), *Against the Madness of Manu: B. R. Ambedkar's Writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy*, Navayana Publications, New Delhi, p. 72.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 73.

<sup>9</sup> Ambedkar B. R. in Moon Vasant (Ed.), (1979), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 1, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Mumbai, p. 9.

of Labourers.<sup>10</sup> Regarding the division of Labourers, he stated that Caste divides Labourers, it dissociates work from interests, it disconnects intelligence from manual labour, it devitalizes by denying to him the right to cultivate vital interests and it prevents mobilization and thus proved to be an obstacle in the economic progress of the individual as well as that of the nation. He identifies caste as a system of graded inequality and exploitation which is very important conceptual tool to locate socio-economic mechanism of caste. The religious apparatus of Brahminism gives graded inequality a ritualistic structural basis. He explained that the principle of commensality also governs inter-caste relations and hierarchy.<sup>11</sup> The principle of graded inequality also works in economic field as Hindu social order gives most and best to the upper castes and gives least and low to the lower castes.<sup>12</sup>

In the process of scientific history writing, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar emphasized on the objectivity as an essential prerequisite, which only could unfold the socio-cultural history of India. But at the same time he was fully aware of the fact that in a caste-based society, objectivity cannot withstand. The colonial as well as the nationalist historiographies are based on the Sanskrit texts, obviously written by the Brahmin scholars. According to him, 'Brahmin subjectivity was so conditioned that it could not critically engage with Sanskrit scriptures and therefore was incapable of ascertaining historical truth'.<sup>13</sup> He stated, "Brahmins are severely limited by the anxiety to preserve their interests. The subjective position of the Brahmin does not allow his intellect full play with honesty and integrity. The Brahmin scholar's search is not for accomplishing historical truth but is intended to maintain sanctity of Sanskrit scriptures."<sup>14</sup> He blamed the Brahmins for the role they played in provoking religious sanctity to the *varna-jati* system. The Brahmins played role in the degradation of shudras and untouchables.<sup>15</sup> By knowing the prejudiced stand of Brahmin historians to uphold social order prescribed in their scriptures, he took up the inquiry of the origin and growth of Varna-Caste system in evolutionary framework of history.

On the contrary to colonial and nationalist historians, he argued that caste is not a static system. According to him, the caste has been a growing institution and never been the same at all times; the shape and form of the caste was different at the time of Alberuni compare to that of Megasthenes.<sup>16</sup> He showed that the conversion of Varnas into several castes is an evolution in the opposite directions; the Brahmins first became endogamous and caste system emerged as the process of emulation of Brahmins.<sup>17</sup> At the same time he

<sup>10</sup> Ambedkar B. R. in Narake Hari (ed.), (1987), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 3, Second Edition, (2008), Education Department, Govt. of Maharashtra, Mumbai, p. 67.

<sup>11</sup> Ambedkar B. R. in Moon Vasant (ed.), (1989), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 5, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Mumbai, p. 162.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 111.

<sup>13</sup> Bagade Umesh, (2015), *Ambedkar's Historical Method*, Critical Quest, New Delhi, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Ambedkar B. R. in Moon Vasant (ed.), (1990), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings And Speeches*, Vol. 7, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Mumbai, p. 240-41.

<sup>15</sup> Gore M. S., (1993), *The Social Context of an Ideology*, Sage Publication, New Delhi, p. 273.

<sup>16</sup> Ambedkar B. R. in Narake Hari (ed.), (1987), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 3, Second Edition, (2008), Education Department, Govt. of Maharashtra, Mumbai, p. 141.

<sup>17</sup> Ambedkar B. R. in Moon Vasant (ed.), (1979), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 1, Education Department, Govt. of Maharashtra, Mumbai, p. 20.

emphasized that India's remarkable homogeneity derives from the caste system because Brahmins are present throughout the subcontinent. He also recognized that the Brahmins could not have imposed the caste system; instead he contended that this type of social organization came about by virtue of a belief in the superiority of the Brahmins and of the acquiescence by the other castes of their inferiority.<sup>18</sup>

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar pointed to very important reality that the social conflict was the prime force of Indian history. He described many social contradictions which brought social upheaval in Indian history. In first case, he argued in his book, '*Who Were the Shudras*' that the struggle between Brahmin and *Kshatriya* led to the degradation of shudras from *Kshatriya varna* to fourth varna. Secondly, he depicted the background of tribal rivalry leading towards clash of interests between sedentary social groups and broken men, while locating genesis of the untouchability. In the third case, he showed a contradiction among caste groups like *savarnas* and *avarnas*; the untouchability is the contradiction between untouchables and Hindus. According to him, untouchables are not Hindus and Hindu does not accept them due to their mentality and so Hindu is great obstacle in removing untouchability. He writes, "The system of untouchability sustains the natural pride of Hindus and makes them feel as well as look big. This is an additional reason why the Hindus are not likely to give up untouchability particularly those large majorities who are small men."<sup>19</sup>

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar also explains the linkages between caste and patriarchy and enslavement of women. He defined caste as endogamy, which ensured subjugation and enslavement of women by prohibiting women from marrying outside the caste. Women were denied freedom over their will and body. Thus the caste system instituted control over women's sexuality, which was put under control of the men of their family and caste.<sup>20</sup> He also deals with the caste-gender complexities associated with dominance and slavery. He shows that slavery was practiced only in descending order means low castes can be slaves of high castes. By citing *Narad Smriti*, which says that slavery is analogous to condition of wife, he suggests the hierarchical unity of gender subordination with caste slavery. The inherent bonding between caste and gender is an important feature of caste hierarchy. He argues that in caste hierarchy legislated by *Manusmriti*, the low caste women were made sexually accessible to the high caste men.<sup>21</sup> He further observed that *Kshatriyas* got provoked against legal injunctions claiming superiority of Brahmins. One of these injunctions granted Brahmin privilege over the wife of *Kshatriya*.<sup>22</sup> He thus explained the caste-gender relations studiously and pointed towards the suppression of women under the caste system. His exploration and interpretation of Indian social history and culture have immensely contributed to the evolution of philosophy and methodology of non-Brahmin historiography.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Jaffrelot Christophe, (2005), *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analysing And Fighting Caste*, Permanent Black, Delhi, Third Impression, P. 33.

<sup>19</sup> Ambedkar B. R. in Moon Vasant (ed.), (1989), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 5, Education Department, Govt. of Maharashtra, Mumbai, p. 102.

<sup>20</sup> Dhamale Kishor, (1998), "Dr. Ambedkar ani ABrahmini Strivadi Itihaslekhan", *ABrahmini Strivadi Itihaslekhanachya Dishene*, (ed.) Bhagwat, Pardeshi, Women Study Centre and Krantisinha Nana Patil Academy, Pune, p. 16-31.

<sup>21</sup> Ambedkar B. R. in Narake Hari (ed.), (1987), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings And Speeches*, Vol. 3, Second Edition, (2008), Education Department, Govt. of Maharashtra, Mumbai, p. 107.

<sup>22</sup> Pandit Nalini, (1996), *Ambedkar*, Granthali Prakashan, Mumbai, p. 116.

<sup>23</sup> Bagade Umesh, (2015), *Ambedkar's Historical Method*, Critical Quest, New Delhi, p. 42.

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar has studied the caste system thoroughly and showed its evil effects and thus argued strongly that the caste system is the biggest hurdle in the progress of the Hindus as a society as well as a nation in any field. According to him, the caste prevents solidarity of society as people have been living in separate groups, and each group hates another; the caste creates anti-social spirit among the Hindus. The higher-caste Hindus have deliberately prevented the lower castes from rising to the cultural level of the higher castes. He showed another evil effect of the caste system that the caste in the hands of orthodox has been a powerful weapon for resisting any kinds of reforms in it. He expressed his faith in his ideal society based on Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, which would be helpful to the society and nation by all means<sup>24</sup>. Even today we can see many atrocities on Dalits and women based on the caste consciousness. The so called upper castes just cannot see the progress of the Dalits and attack them physically or mentally. It is evident throughout India from many examples like Khairlanji, Kharda, Sonai, Buldhana, Sehranpur, Gujrat, etc. where dalits had to face atrocities only because of Cast based mentality of the upper castes. In many offices and colleges also dalits are being treated with many kinds of injustice. So to conclude, I would like to say that Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was very rightly told that the Caste is the main and very harmful obstacle in the overall progress of the nation.

So he urged the Hindus to annihilate the worst affecting Caste system, a barrier to the social reforms and to the progress of human being. He clearly warned them that anything built on the foundations of the caste system will crack and never be a whole. He also suggested rightly the ways of eradicating this evil system of caste; the immediate measure is stimulating inter-caste marriages but the real remedy is to destroy the belief in the sanctity of the *Shastras*, which teach them the religion of caste and direct them to maintain caste as far as possible and to undergo *prayaschitta*, (expiation) when they cannot.<sup>25</sup> The real remedy given by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was not found ground in the minds of upper caste intelligentsia and all his attempt to reform the Hindu society were not supported by the higher caste Hindus and so this was the basic reason why he left the Hinduism.

<sup>24</sup> Ambedkar B. R. in Moon Vasant (ed.), (1979), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 1, Education Department, Govt. of Maharashtra, Mumbai, p. 57.

<sup>25</sup> Ambedkar B. R. in Moon Vasant (ed.), (1979), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 1, Education Department, Govt. of Maharashtra, Mumbai, p. 66-74.